

Problems with Prayer

Overcoming the Intellectualization of Prayer

Many people arrive in AA with a bias against the custom of saying prayers, or at least the prayers common in the Program and Meetings.

For the Christian Objection

Many Christians take the injunction against memorized or dictated prayers seriously. This is found in the New Testament in Mark 6:4 and 6:5

"And when thou prayest, thou shalt not be as the hypocrites are: for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and in the corners of the streets, that they may be seen of men. Verily I say unto you, they have their reward.

"But thou, when thou prayest, enter into thy closet, and when thou hast shut thy door, pray to thy Father which is in secret; and thy Father which seeth in secret shall reward thee openly."

When the groups perform the "Serenity Prayer," "The Lord's Prayer," or the "St. Francis Prayer," many are simply showing the willingness to participate in the ritual of opening or closing a meeting.

It is not prayer – it is ritual and extends the comfort of a predictability to approach the serious work of Recovery.

They do not know they are not praying, but many use this avenue to find their way to faith while confronting the pain and crisis created by alcoholism.

Most meetings allow for personal prayer in silence, but your participation is an act of willing submission to the process of Spiritual Awakening, which is the only result of the Twelfth Step and the effect for which we work, regardless of your specific beliefs of a Spiritual life.

For the Non-Christian Objection

Alcoholics began as part of a Christian organization, the Oxford Groups. When asked to provide a "Christmas Message" for the Grapevine in 1953, Bill Wilson responded by saying:

"The more I thought it over the more I got buffaloed. I said, 'Gee, this society of ours has moved into every quarter of the Earth. Here a great many of us are Christians. A good many are not. We have Jews who look to Jehovah. Out on the plains we have Indians who look to the Great Spirit. And now that we have established beachheads in the Pacific Islands, in Asia, in India, in South Africa... We know that we have brothers and sisters who look to Allah, and some to Buddha.'"

And I thought to myself, 'How can anybody possibly talk about Christmas to all these?'"

Then came this thought, 'Well, by whatever name we call it, we of AA have Christmas every day. In the sense that we give and in the sense that we receive.'"

*Yes. The kind of giving that demands no reward.
The kind of loving that bears no price tag.*

---- Bill Wilson, 1953
At his 18th Anniversary

When AA separated from the Oxford Group, the invitation to Recovery took the form of a Higher Power,” “a God of your understanding,” which can be the god of your own faith.

Some people think the AA program is trying to convert everyone to a specific religion. Religion is not the job of AA – faith is the job of the person in Recovery and is between them and their personal Higher Power.

For the Non-Believer Objection

Contrary to propaganda spread about Alcoholics Anonymous as a religious front; those who do not believe, or actively do not believe, are welcome and invited into the rooms.

We would not be in AA if we had not already experienced enough of a change to know that the ideas we had proved false and did not keep us sober. On page 52 of the Big Book, after outlining the various forms of suffering our unmanageable lives had presented to us:

“Was not a basic solution of these bedevilments more important than whether we should see newsreels of lunar flight? Of course it was.”

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Many Christians object to the prayers, as well, because their faith tells them to pray from the heart, not based on set, scripted prayers.

Prayers are a custom going back to the time of AA’s formation as part of the Oxford Groups. To say the words of the prayer is not praying, any more than saying the Pledge of Allegiance was pledging the flag or the country. As a child, I was required to say the Pledge of Allegiance because that was the way my school day started.

There are also many people for whom the Prayer and the Pledge are genuinely of whom they are or what they believe.

For those of us who have long worship at the altar of the Human Brain, intellectual pride can be sufficient to keep us drunk. We have seen non-believers stay sober based on their personal knowledge that they are not the greatest power of the Universe, particularly when we had spent so much of our lives acting as if we were.

Saying the Prayer is not intellectual hypocrisy, it is the concession that staying sober is more important than intellectual pride; that finding the new life is more important than “being right.”

Those who do not have a faith, or are very actively against the very concept of any religion, may have a more difficult job to gain and sustain long-term sobriety. Our egos may push us to stop drinking for months, or even years, but we can be guaranteed that life will provide some punches that will require more than our solitary mental prowess can muster.

Many people that come to AA use the rooms (the body of people who stay sober) as their Power Greater than Themselves. They could do together what we failed to do alone and they were a visible resource for those of us who cannot, or will not, concede the core of “spiritual.”

Turning back to our favorite reference, dictionary.com, we find several entries for “spiritual”:

Dictionary Definition of “Spiritual”

spir-it-u-al [spir-i-choo-uhl] Show IPA
–adjective

1. *of, pertaining to, or consisting of spirit; incorporeal.*
2. *of or pertaining to the spirit or soul, as distinguished from the physical nature: a spiritual approach to life.*

3. *closely akin in interests, attitude, outlook, etc.: the professor's spiritual heir in linguistics.*
4. *of or pertaining to spirits or to spiritualists; supernatural or spiritualistic.*
5. *characterized by or suggesting predominance of the spirit; ethereal or delicately refined: She is more of a spiritual type than her rowdy brother.*
6. *of or pertaining to the spirit as the seat of the moral or religious nature.*
7. *of or pertaining to sacred things or matters; religious; devotional; sacred.*
8. *of or belonging to the church; ecclesiastical: lords spiritual and temporal.*
9. *of or relating to the mind or intellect.*

–noun

10. *a spiritual or religious song: authentic folk spirituals.*
11. *spirituals, affairs of the church.*
12. *a spiritual thing or matter.*

For our purpose, many meanings of the word can apply, but it is the first definition that we feel best serves the understanding of “spirit” as presented through the Program.

“1. of, pertaining to, or consisting of spirit; incorporeal.”

A feature of AA Recovery that has proved a serious obstacle for intellectuals in the Program has been the necessary concession that there are things in our life that are not subject to discussion under the laws of physics and our understanding of the material world.

We find a level of coincidence far beyond statistical norms, which guide us to the next correction phase of our life and Recovery that becomes increasingly difficult to accept as random chance.

We find harmonics of situations in meetings with what we encounter in the world that becomes almost eerie.

We find that when we do the Program the way the Program says to do it, we find periods of unexplainable comfort, serenity, and sometimes joy or happiness where we should logically be free of such elevation in emotional response.

Over time, we realize our ability to understand our own reality is limited. The human brain cannot adequately classify or reduce reality to understandable terms.

Religious people have a way that works for them, regardless of our judgment of their beliefs. For them, “God did it” is a perfectly acceptable answer.

Perhaps we can end the intellectual war by simply admitting “it happened” and remain open to learning, experiencing, and possibly, understanding more as time goes on.

There is a limit to understanding as it affects the real world. If you fall off a high building, understanding gravity does not change the rate at which you fall.

Many things simply are. They exist and can have effects on our lives, emotions, and our place in the world, without supplying an answer for our ever-questioning brain.

Intellectual alcoholics love to judge things as “good” or “bad,” but in Recovery we are bombarded with realities that defy our judgment – so we are faced with a dilemma.

Do we accept a reality we cannot understand, which gives us health, joy, and belonging, or do we insist on rejecting the reality of Recovery to the small part we can classify and remain isolated, risking Recovery in favor of an imagined superiority?

When you stand in the room and say the words to the prayer, or simply stand with the other people in the group as they say the prayer, you are

really in a room of AA, really with people who have shared the pain of your experience and who are willing to share their Recovery with you.

Why fight?

A Different Idea of God as an Higher Power

Some people have a serious problem with religion or what has previously been presented to them as “God.”

It is sometimes suggested that a newcomer use the group as a Higher Power because the men and women in that group can do what the newcomer can't. Stay sober. They come to understand “God” as “Good Orderly Direction” or “Group of Drunks.”

Some say the struggling newcomer should accept some inanimate object as their higher power. The idea is not to worship that item but to stop worshipping your own brain and desires as the force that rules reality. As one old-timer said, “It gets your life out of the hands of the idiot who's had it so far!”

The key is to give up the idea that the newcomer is God, or gets to decide how the world should be. The idea is willing submission, whether someone else agrees with their conception of a Higher Power or not. It is a move in the necessary direction.

There is another suggestion. Completely unofficial, of course. The person objecting to the “God” aspect begins their prayer as “God, in whom I do not know if I will ever believe...” and then say the prayer.

In the **Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions**, the Serenity Prayer ends with “Thy will, not mine, be done.”

Your definition of “thy” is based your personal conception of God, the Power Greater Than Yourself.